THE ENERGIES OF GOD
John 14:15-21
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The task of the church of Jesus Christ in every age is to communicate what we know about God in a way which is understood. That seems simple enough. The simplicity, however, is deceiving. Our particular segment of the human story is characterized by uncertainty, skepticism, secularism - none of which blend smoothly with "God-talk". Our particular segment of the story is characterized by a radical revolution in communication. At our finger tips, daily, is a storehouse of information, greater than people before us experienced in a lifetime. Television, data processing, radio, telephone, satellite, silicon chip, computer - information flowing, surging, like the life blood of a giant organism. In an uncertain, skeptical, secular world, comfortable with the most innovative communication methods, "God-talk" in this mode: didactic, lecture-style, pulpit elevated ornately, robe - designed four hundred years ago, twenty minute monolgue, is a remnant of a portion of the story gone for decades, a real period piece.

The task is not simple. But nothing about the external problems compares with the difficulty of the subject itself. And nothing about the broad subject is quite as perplexing as one of its fine points, the theological idiosyncrasy called the "Holy Spirit" - and the doctrine of the Trinity.

The difficulties begin at the outset. Christians have always known that the idea which is contained in the term "Holy Spirit" is critical to the whole enterprise. But it has never been easy to express: even in the New Testament.

In the Fourth Gospel, in the middle of what are known as the farewell discourses, Jesus is talking to His disciples about what it will be like after He is gone. The point He is making is that they will not be without resources: that part of what He has come to mean to them will continue. The passage is well known, particularly the verse, "I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever." The King James version translated the ambiguous Greek word "Comforter". More recent scholarship, however, has concluded that "comfort" is not the sense of it at all. Rather Jesus is talking about the experience of being lifted up when we are down, strengthened to fight another day when we are defeated and without hope. The Revised Standard Version translates the word "Counselor": the New English Bible uses "Advocate". Today's English Version says simply: "I will ask the Father and He will give you another helper who will be with you forever."

Jesus was telling His friends that they could count on God. No matter what happened to Him, God would stand with them. No matter how down they were, God would breathe new life into them, reinvigorate them, instill new vitality in them. They could count on it: expect it: regardless of what words they used to describe it.

They were Jews and the Jews, you see, were far more concerned with experiences than they were with concepts. Hebrew language is active, full of good verbs, and very short on the descriptive abstractions the Greeks loved so much. In the Old Testament, the question "What is God like?" is answered by telling what God does. The later Greek influence emerges in theology that focuses on God's characteristics rather than His activity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the way the Christian Church has been talking about God for something like 1,700 years. There are problems with that, obviously; not the least of which is that the language embodies a Greek philosophic system

with which we are no longer comfortable. Fourth century theologians argued strenuously about the "essence of God" over against the substance of God, in raging debates known only to the students of theology today. In his recent work, Does God Exist? Roman Catholic Hans Kung states: "...the spirit still remains, for many, theologically, absolutely unintelligible...Are we not imposing on modern man a burden of faith that many are not prepared to bear?" (P.695).

Kung makes his own church very nervous by asking those kinds of questions, even though he goes on to answer in a most helpful way. Our own Presbyterian Church was thrown into an ecclesiastical trauma because a candidate for ordination recently used less than conventional words to answer questions about the Trinity. "Is Jesus God?" he was asked, and he had the audacity to answer "God is God". Closer to home, when Moslem radicals turned the United States Embassy in Tehran into a hostage compound, it became very clear that most Americans, most Christians, knew almost nothing, nothing accurate at least, about the Moslem faith. It was news to us that there were sects or denominations within Mohammadism as widely different as the Pentecostals and Anglicans are within Christendom. Locally, and across the country, efforts were made to establish a dialogue with Moslems. Consistently, the one point of Christian theology utterly unintelligible to Moslems was the matter of the Trinity in general and the Holy Spirit in particular. No amount of talking will persuade the strongly monotheistic Moslem that we don't believe in three Gods when we say God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit: God in three persons.

Now the fact that adherents of other religions don't understand a particularly fine point of Christian doctrine is not reason, by itself, to rethink the doctrine. But it ought, it seems to me, to give us pause, particularly when the doctrine is not entirely meaningful to the people who are supposed to believe it. My favorite story about the matter used to be told by the late Cardinal Cushing. The Cardinal was walking in downtown Boston one day when a man in front of him fell suddenly, apparently the victim of a heart attack. The Cardinal knelt beside him immediately, leaned over and said, "My son are you a Catholic?" No response; "Are you a Christian?" Again, no response; "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?" At this the man opened one eye, and to the crowd that had gathered, said, "Here I am dying and he's asking me riddles!"

Why not simply discard the doctrine? That's not a new suggestion. The church has held onto the doctrine Trinity because it prevents theology from slipping into the simplicity and narrowness of Unitarianism. Presbyterian theologian John Leith reminds us that there are three kinds of Unitarianism: the very rational Unitarianism of the Father that focuses solely on God as creator; the Unitarianism of the Son which thinks only in terms of savior and redeemer; and the Unitarianism of the Spirit which can only talk about the intense, emotional experience associated with the Charismatic movement. The God about whom Christians wish to talk, however, is all of that.

In fact part of the inherent danger in religion is to render God too simple, too understandable. "Your God Is Too Small,"J.B.Phillips wrote, and that, in fact, is true for many of us. We work hard to reduce the divine to the least common denominator, to ideas and intellectual constructs that fit small minds and into the lyrics of the latest Country and Western hit. Theologically, the trouble with most religion is not its complexity but its simplicity, its inherent tendency to make God in its own image, to characterize His providence in terms of American Foreign Policy and His will in terms of the Republican Platform, or Democratic Platform, to make Him sound American, if not Lutheran or Presbyterian.

Part of what the Trinity and the term God the Holy Spirit does for me, therefore, is to remind me that what I'm trying to talk about is something that can't be talked about very adequately. Trinity reminds me that mystery - a sense of the otherness of God, the unexplained and unexplainable is essential in honest religion. I read a prayer by J. Barrie Shepherd recently that said that for me, very eloquently:

"O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, although I have been taught
to speak and think of you as one God,
three in one, and one in three,
in fact you are a mystery
beyond all my thought and reason and understanding.
And for this I praise and glorify your name.
For I have learned that mystery is a quality
that pervades so much that is basic
to the richness of my living."
(Diary of Daily Prayer, J. Barrie Shepherd, p.39).

The doctrine of the Trinity is a timely reminder that there is more to God than you and I ever will comprehend: that the most appropriate initial posture is kneeling: that awe and childlike wonder in the presence of the Almighty are the foundation of mature faith.

The problem is the use of the word person - as in the favorite hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy, God in three persons, Blessed Trinity. There are often three chairs on the Chancel of a traditional Presbyterian Church, behind the pulpit. I suppose the reason is aesthetic balance, but as a youngster I always concluded that it had something to do with the three persons of the Trinity. "Person" - "an individual human being" Webster's first definition reads. "God in three persons" thus becomes semantically very complex for us, if not theologically. It's only in the dictionary footnote that you read the Latin root of Person, "persona" which means "actor's mask, character in a play". That's what the doctrine intends and it is what the fourth century Greeks meant, I believe. God is God. God has acted in at least three ways which we have experienced: as Father Creator, as Savior, and as Helper, Presence.

I was intrigued to encounter a brief vignette in a journal I read which observed this: "after the Fourth Century the Eastern Orthodox Church discussed the energies of God rather than the attributes of God". (Ernie Campbell's Notebook, Spring 1981, p.4). I liked that so much I took a sermon title from it, as so frequently happens with our marvelous discoveries and insights, we barely begin to enjoy our new information when we find that others have been there first

David H.C.Read, for instance, writes that "part of my Christian belief is that the ultimate source of all energy is God". (Unfinished Easter, p.103). That is very helpful. God is creative energy. God is the force that organizes chaos into order. God is the power that takes primal matter and makes universes and solar systems and DNA and photosynthesis and lettuce. God is that incredible force which has moved through time with ever renewing vigor, in evolutionary magnificence, from single cell amoebas to sharks and lowland gorillas, resting for this moment in time in Homo Sapiens. God is what makes us want and need one another, for in the wanting and needing is not only the goodness of our humanity but the absolute assurance that creation will continue.

William Muehl, attorney and professor at Yale Divinity School writes: "... Christianity is embarassed by the creative energies of God and deeply uncertain about the way in which they fit into the pattern of the moral life." (All the

+ God is close
Source of our energy
... ... comfort

Damned Angels, p.41). There is a sense in which we do prefer the safe abstractions of the Greeks, the elaborate creedal formulations, the scholarly discussions of the relationship of the eternal Christ to the earthly Jesus. There is a sense in which Western Christianity has always blushed at the healthy sensuality of the Old Testament.

But the God of the Bible is creative: human sexuality is His invention. Life is celebrated and affirmed and continued. "The energies of God" may be a far more meaningful phrase than the "Persons of the Trinity". It allows for a healthy affirmation of the created order. It allows as well, for Christian affirmation of the mystery of human creativity instead of the historic suspicion and occasional hostility with which the church has viewed the arts. It suggests that alone among the created animals human beings stopped and drew pictures on cave walls because of a divine impulse. It suggests that the impulse to arrange colors on a canvas, and musical sounds in meaningful relation to one another and words in rhyme and meter is evidence of divine, creative energy. It suggests that when humanity addresses humanity in the precise complexity of Bach or the intensity of Beethoven or the passion of Van Gogh, or the depth and earthiness of Walt Whitman, we have observed the evidence of God.

Holy Spirit - the energy of God - in creation, in human love, in human art, but also, most importantly in your intimate life and mine. Holy Spirit - God close to us. God using His energy in us and with us and for us. The early Greek word, remember, came out "helper", the one who picks up what is knocked down, the one who breathes new life into the out-of-breath; the inspirer, the courage and strength-giver. To believe in God the Holy Spirit is to accept the fact that God gives intimately, personally, that which I need to live today and tomorrow.

We know, I think, what it means to be depleted. We know what it means to give and give and give until the account is empty - to family, home, spouse, vocation, activities, clubs, church. We know what it feels like to be winded, physically and spiritually. We know, I have observed, the dry emptiness of spiritual exhaustion. We know what it means to have spent it all, loved all we can love, cheered, laughed and prayed as much as we are able. And here - where all of us are some of the time and some of us are all the time, God the life-giver, God the creator, gently re-stores, and fills and heals and supports and encourages. That's the promise of the Gospel. God the Holy Spirit: God described by Professor Kung almost poetically... "Perceptable and yet not perceptable, invisible and yet powerful, real like-energy-charged air, the wind, the storm, as important for life as the air we breathe..."

Amen.

God eternal, in the busyness of life, we expend without replenishing: we give and take little time to receive. God, with life-giving energy, renew us, recreate us. In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.